

## Comics: Meet the Artist - With Dave Coverly, Artist/Creator "Speedbump"

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[http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/zforum/01/auto\\_cartoon\\_coverly042701.htm#NOW](http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/zforum/01/auto_cartoon_coverly042701.htm#NOW)

Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion. This month, Dave Coverly creator of the cartoon panel "Speedbump" is online to discuss his cartoon, the pace of creating a cartoon on a daily basis and what his work is all about.

Coverly admits there is no overriding theme, no tidy little philosophy that describes what "Speedbump" is all about. "Basically," he says, "if life were a movie, these would be the out-takes."

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us for the debut of "Comics: Meet the Artist" I'm your host, Suzanne Tobin, and in my "real job" I edit the Comics pages for The Washington Post. Today our guest is Dave Coverly, the creator of "Speed Bump," one of my personal favorites. Hi, Dave, so glad you could join us today.

Arlington, Va.: I stopped reading the comic pages after the retirement of Gary Larsen and "The Far Side" - until a friend told me about "Speed Bump". Now it's the first thing I look at in the paper each day. Just where do your ideas come from? Do you spend a lot of time thinking them up or do they just pop into your head?

Dave Coverly: Ideas mostly come from organized daydreaming. They rarely just pop in my head. Basically, I get a big pot of coffee, sitting on my couch in my studio and just letting my mind wander.

Suzanne Tobin: So, Dave, let's take Tuesday's cartoon for example. There was a shoe shine man who said to his customer, "It's extra to scrape off all the little people you stepped on on your way to the top." How did you get the idea for that one?

Dave Coverly: That idea came from the phrase, "all the little people," and then just taking that phrase literally, which is what I often do, and making the connection with shoe shines, and there's no telling where the connection comes from. That's the mystery, even to

me, why you make connections like that.

Fairfax, Va.: What kinds of things do you read and what do you watch on TV? Is U.S. News & World Report your cup of tea, or is "The Weakest Link" more your thing?

Dave Coverly: As far as TV, I don't watch any reality TV. I get enough of that at home. I watch sports, that's about it. As for what I read, mostly just Victoria's Secret catalogs, you get a lot of cartoon ideas that way.

Arlington, Va.: How do you ink your cartoons? What kind of pen and ink do you use?

Dave Coverly: I use a black Rapidograph pen. It's a technical pen. I ink very slowly, since my cartoon's tend to be labor intensive.

Bob, McLean Va.: Can I have those catalogs when you're done with them?

Dave Coverly: Sorry, I reuse them.

Oak Hill, Va.: Have you ever considered having a recurring character in Speedbump?

Dave Coverly: No, because for one thing my ideas dictate new characters all the time and I don't enjoy drawing the same thing twice. I like to meet new cartoon characters every day, that's part of the fun for me.

New York, N.Y.: How did you come to name your cartoon "Speedbump"?

Dave Coverly: That's actually a pretty good story.

When I originally submitted it to the syndicates, it didn't have a name, because I'd been submitting individual panels to publications like Esquire and USA Today as gag cartoons. So Creators Syndicate asked me to submit a list of about 20 possible names, and Speed Bump was the unanimous choice. My favorite that they didn't pick was "The Wide World of Stretch Pants" but it was too long for a one-panel title. I imagine that most of my characters wear stretch pants.

Brisbane, Australia: Who inspired you when you were younger to be a cartoonist?

Dave Coverly: My inspirations have changed as I've moved on in cartooning. Besides "Peanuts" when I was a kid, I would say "Herman" by Jim Unger and Jim Borgman, who draws "Zits" (he's also the editorial cartoonist for the Cincinnati Enquirer), George Booth from the New Yorker, Sergio Aragones from Mad magazine, and, most

recently, it's a man named Quino, a South American who draws single-panel wordless cartoons.

Suzanne Tobin: Quino? Where would we see his work? I've never heard of him.

Dave Coverly: You can find his book collections. You can find them online, but he's not in any papers that I know of in the States.

Fairfax, Va.: So how many cups of coffee do you drink every day? And what's your work schedule like? Do you wake up early or get up noonish?

Dave Coverly: I would measure it in pots, not cups. I would say I go through a couple of pots a day. As for my schedule, I'm a night person, I go to bed very late, and yet I still get up very early because I have two kids, 6 and 1 1/2. My work schedule is pretty straightforward: coffee, croissants and ideas in the morning and chocolate, TV and drawing in the afternoon.

Herndon, Va.: Do you think it's more important to have a well-drawn cartoon (I'm thinking Frank Cho) or a well-written gag (John Callahan)?

Dave Coverly: I'll take Callahan anyday. He's very edgy, very witty and very intelligent. I think because of the way that cartoons are being shrunk down these days that the idea and the writing is becoming more important than the actual artwork. I think you can save a bad drawing with a great idea, but you can't save a bad idea with a great drawing.

Merrifield, Va.: If you were a tree, what kind would you be?

Dave Coverly: I sure wouldn't be an elm because they're buzz-sawing one down right next to my house, so I'm glad this wasn't a radio interview. (I'm also glad it wasn't TV, because I haven't taken a shower.)

Evanston, Ill.: Mr. Coverly -- what do you think of the more controversial comic strips these days, like Liberty Meadows and Boondocks?

Dave Coverly: I would say that there's definitely a place for them on the Comics page. And that if people have a problem with them, a good compromise is putting them on the Editorial page. But I think they're important and necessary, especially Boondocks because I think that it's easy for cartoonists to fall into cookie cutter mode, and all be too similar. I like to have a wide variety of cartoons to choose from. Personally, I think cartoons should be both funny AND make you

think. Someday I may even try that!

Arlington, Va.: Dave, what do you think of Bill Keane? Does he still really have legs for the comics page. Do you think his cartoon is funny, useful or neither?

Dave Coverly: I think Bil Keane's cartoon is incredibly useful because it's incredibly popular. I think that humor is subjective and if a cartoon has a following then it's doing something right.

Fairfax Va.: I'm proud to say I was one of the strong proponents behind the email rush and a loud voice to the Post when they tried to get rid of you a few years ago. Glad as all heck you made it back! Do you have any thoughts on the Agnes v. Liberty Meadows "controversy" currently in the Post, both specifically and in an overall "end-sum game" that the comics seem to be? When another comic is replaced is there a sense of sadness? Glee that it isn't yours? Or perhaps hope for a new voice to come about, as you did?

Dave Coverly: First I'd like to say thank you for your support. I have to say that was probably the biggest thrill of my career so far--being reinstated in The Post. They got over 400 calls and e-mail. There's definitely relief when it's not your own. I know lots and lots of syndicated cartoonists, and it becomes hard to be objective when some of these people are your friends. You tend to root for your friends publicly, but not privately.

I don't follow every cartoon in every paper, I just read my hometown paper, the Ann Arbor News. But I love Agnes, I think--going back to the previous question--it's really well written and it's warm and it's funny. I think it deserves to be carried in lots of papers.

Suzanne Tobin: I just want everyone to know, I was not the Comics Editor when they dropped Speed Bump. I was 300 yards away in the Weekend section, and I have people who'll vouch for that.

Chantilly, Va.: Dave! I haven't showered either!! Any thoughts on just what else we might have in common? This is too cool!

Dave Coverly: Are you wearing underwear?

Fall Church, Va.: Do you ever draw a cartoon then decide it sucks and trash it? And do you ever come up with a great idea, but find you simply cannot draw it?

Dave Coverly: Yes, I do trash a few. Generally before they're inked though. Since it takes me about an hour to ink a panel, I think long and hard about whether it works for me before uncapping my pen. Occasionally I will come up with ideas that contain large machinery

or very busy scenes that I'll reject because I don't want to put the time into drawing it. Unless the idea is just GREAT, it's usually not worth it, because I think the reader can see when a cartoonist is struggling.

Since I know pretty much what I can and cannot draw, I don't think I've ever had an idea that I liked that I sat down and couldn't draw.

Gaithersburg, Md.: Do all the cartoons you draw get published, or does your editor sack some?

Dave Coverly: They all get published NOW, which may or may not be a good thing. But early on they edited a little more strictly because I didn't have a reader base yet that would put up with my idiocy.

Chantilly, Va.: re: Underwear --

Yes. Yes I am. But not yours... is that something in common or a difference, then?

Dave Coverly: That must be someone else in my underwear then.

Fairfax, Va.: I missed the Speedbump book signing when you were in town a few months ago. Any plans to come back to the area?

Dave Coverly: If enough people buy the first book ("Speed Bump: A Collection of Cartoon Skidmarks" for those of you who want to quick click on Borders.com and order it) then Andrews-McMeel will publish a second collection, and I'll definitely be back.

Jean, Herndon: Why do you think there aren't many female cartoonists?

Dave Coverly: There are too many male ones. Seriously, I just think it's because historically there haven't been many, so I think it's harder for women to have role models. It sounds like a copout but it's the best reason I can think of. And there are some great women cartoonists, like Hilary Price who does "Rhymes With Orange" is great, as is one of the "Six Chix," Rina Piccolo. I have one of Rina's cartoons right on my wall here in my studio.

Suzanne Tobin: That brings up a question I wanted to ask. If all of us are tacking up cartoons by you and other people in our little cubicles at work, what do cartoonists tack up on their bulletin board at work?

Dave Coverly: I can't speak for other cartoonists, but I have hidden camera pictures of my readers on my wall.

Fairfax, Va.: I've noticed that you put your email addy in your comics. Do you get a lot of email? Any love notes? Hate notes? Ideas? Do you respond to all/any of them?

Dave Coverly: I do get alot of email. And I do TRY to respond to it all. I get the whole gamut. 99% of them are very kind. I get the occasional angry person. And you get all sorts of strange ones, but I enjoy them all--especially the strange ones. And feel free to drop me an e-mail. The feedback's really helpful, because I can use all the adult conversation I can get.

Scott - Front Royal, Va.: Dave, I can't help but get competetive when I view Speed Bump since we both took cartooning classes together and had competing cartoons in the Plainwell HS paper.

Any suggestions on alternative careers since I'll never be able to catch up with your talent or wit? As long as the job doesn't involve raw sludge or taxidermy I'm open....

Dave Coverly: This has got to be Scott Dueweke. Man, you can have my job. I know how much you travel, and I'll trade you anyday. But you should know the Plainwell HS paper has gone downhill since you left.

Potomac, Md.: My husband says you must really dislike women and cats, because they are always drawn to be lumpy, frumpy misfits with bug eyes and blobby features. I tell him this isn't true - you see all people that way. Which one of us is right?

Dave Coverly: You're definitely right. I see all people that way. I'm an equal opportunity lumper.

Alexandria, Va.: Do you make a lot off the Speedbump merchandising?

Dave Coverly: Make alot of WHAT? No, I do have a line of greeting cards with American Greetings (which can be found at drugstores, K-Marts, etc.--end of blatant promotional blurb). Other than that the only thing that I sell is one cartoon that I sell online at [artsicle.com](http://artsicle.com). It's called "Morning in Hell," and it's a coffee theme, of course.

McLean, Va.: Speaking of online cartoons, what do you think of internet cartooning?

Dave Coverly: I think the Internet is a great place for exposure. And there's a lot of great stuff you can only find on the Internet.

Gaithersburg, Md.: Do you ever worry about getting burned out, like so many cartoonists after about ten years?

Dave Coverly: I worry about that on bad days. But then there are the good days where I'll get lots of ideas and then I don't worry about it, I figure they'll keep coming. You really have the whole world working for you. It's just a matter of keeping your eyes open.

Jado Jack - Front Royal, Va.: Have your kids proved to be a distraction, working at home, or a new source of inspiration?

Dave Coverly: They're definitely seen my cartoons going in a more kid-related direction. I still try to keep the ideas a little twisted, but they are a new source of information and they also are a distraction. My 1 1/2 year old tends to draw all over everything in my office and I've lost ideas she's scribbled out. Just the fact that I work at home is a distraction, so I can hear everything that goes on all day. I hear the temper tantrums and the laughing and it's very hard to stay in my studio because I'm afraid I'm missing something.

Mike Baldwin, Cornered: Hi Dave, just want to say how much I enjoy your work. Keeps the rest of us panel folk on our toes...

Dave Coverly: For those of you who aren't familiar with Mike's work, he does a one-panel cartoon like I do and he's being far too humble.

Suzanne Tobin: Boy how time flies when you're having fun. Thanks to you, Dave, and to all our readers who sent in questions. I wish we could have gotten to all of them. They were wonderful questions! I hope this chat has given you an idea just how funny Dave really is. The good news is we'll back in two weeks with another guest, still to be determined. Stay tuned to Live Online for details. And feel free to e-mail me at [tobins@washpost.com](mailto:tobins@washpost.com) with suggestions on possible guests.

Dave Coverly: Thanks, Suzanne, and all the washingtonpost.com users, for putting up with me. I managed to get a shower in while we were chatting.